

Getting Somalia Wrong

Written by Mary Harper

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MARY HARPER, MAY 9 2012

'The world's most dangerous place'... 'The world's worst humanitarian crisis'... 'The world's most corrupt nation'... 'The world's most comprehensively failed state'... 'The most dangerous capital city on earth'... These are just some of the labels that have been applied to Somalia by journalists, academics, aid workers and politicians.

Somalia is in many ways the perfect media story. It can be reported in such a way that it conforms to misleading stereotypes about Africa, giving the audience what it expects to hear, read and see about the continent. It has become for many a land of pirates, starving babies, corrupt politicians and Al Qaeda operatives.

It offers journalists 'two for the price of one'; one minute they can be filmed ducking gunfire outside battle-scarred buildings, the next they can stand amongst starving children, against a backdrop of desperate mothers queuing for food handouts. If they are lucky, they can squeeze in a pirate story too.

As Ian Birrell of The Observer writes, "think of Africa and for too many people it conjures up images of hunger, poverty, disease and conflict. These are the four horsemen of the supposed African apocalypse. Journalists seeking stories look for death, decay and destruction while charities seeking donations reinforce the stereotypes with pictures of malnourished children and dying adults. Often, they work and travel together, reporters rarely subjecting charities to the level of scrutiny applied to other vital institutions."

By portraying Somalia as the ultimate 'African apocalypse', journalists can sell their stories, aid workers can attract donations, and politicians can be seen as saviours of the world as they promise to 'do something' about Somalia.

But this is not the whole story of Somalia; portraying it in this light has led in some instances to bad policy, which has at times made things worse, not better, on the ground.

Two of the most glaring examples of where 'getting Somalia wrong' led to poor foreign policy decisions were during the US-led intervention of the early 1990s and the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006.

During the 1990s, what was initially a largely humanitarian mission to try to help Somalis affected by war and famine turned into a full-scale conflict between Somali militias and foreign troops who had initially come to 'keep the peace' and ensure the safe delivery of aid supplies. The most dramatic incident was captured in the Hollywood movie *Black Hawk Down*, when two American helicopters were shot down by Somali fighters, the naked bodies of US servicemen dragged through the streets of the capital Mogadishu.

In 2006, after fifteen years of warlord rule, a group of *sharia* courts formed a loose alliance, known as the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which created a degree of peace and order in Mogadishu and other parts of southern and central Somalia. In the post 9/11 world, the US in particular seemed unable to view Somalia outside the prism of Al Qaeda, concluding that the UIC represented a serious and violent Islamist threat. The US backed an Ethiopian invasion which drove the UIC from power, but resulted in the emergence of the far more radical force, *Al Shabaab*. This group has since merged with Al Qaeda, attracted hundreds of foreign fighters and carried out terror attacks outside Somalia.

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US-led policy towards Somalia during this period in a sense created the monster it was trying to destroy. As the academic Markus Virgil Hoehne argues, "Somalia since 2006 is possibly the clearest example for the failure of US (and Ethiopian) counter-terrorism policy, which actually has produced what it was supposed to counter."

Somalia doubtless has many problems, and these should not be ignored. But it is also a land of opportunity, dynamism and extraordinary entrepreneurial spirit.

Many other African countries are only now beginning to catch up with Somalia's mobile telecommunication system, one of the cheapest and most efficient on the continent. Somalia is home to Africa's biggest money transfer company. It exports more live animals than any country on earth.

Somalia has entered its third decade without a functioning central government. It has come top of The Failed States Index for the past four years in a row. But this does not mean that the society or the economy have failed. A study by the US-based think tank, The Independent Institute, found that "far from chaos and economic collapse, Somalia is generally doing better than when it had a state... urban businessmen, international corporations and rural pastoralists have all functioned in stateless Somalia, achieving standards of living for the country that are equal or superior to many other African nations."

The West may be missing a trick by perceiving Somalia as nothing but trouble, a drain on resources and a source of Islamist terror.

Turkey, in particular, has adopted a very different approach towards the country, bursting onto the scene during the famine of 2011. The Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, scored a diplomatic coup when he and his family visited Mogadishu in August 2011, the first non-African leader to do so for more than twenty years.

Turkish workers have flooded into the city, building roads, hospitals and schools. Turkish Airlines began commercial flights to Mogadishu. Somalis named their babies 'Erdogan'. Turkey has now gained a foothold in Africa, home to six of the world's ten fastest growing economies. The way it has conducted itself in Somalia may well serve it well in terms of developing political and economic relationships with other African nations.

Somalia itself is fast developing into a country of economic opportunity. Experts say there is a great underground valley of oil that arcs across the north of the country. Oil exploration is well underway in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland in the north-east – this is being carried out by Horn Petroleum Corporation, a subsidiary of the Canadian firm, Africa Oil. The Chinese giant, China National Offshore Oil Corporation has also been granted permission to drill for oil, and there are reports that India has proposed to train Somalia's army as a way of possibly gaining rights to exploit the country's hydrocarbons.

Somalia not only has potential in terms of resources. In hotels in the safer parts of the territory, there are delegations of business people from Saudi Arabia, Norway, Turkey and elsewhere, as well as Somalis returning from the diaspora, looking for opportunities in the telecommunications, livestock and other sectors.

By continuing to present Somalia as the world's worst country, elements of the media and other sectors are not only doing Somalia a disservice, they are probably blinding parts of the outside world to the increasing opportunities the country has to offer.

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Mary Harper is Africa Editor at the BBC World Service. She has reported on Somalia and other parts of Africa for the past twenty years. Her book 'Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State' was published by Zed Press in February 2012. Her website can be found at: www.maryharper.co.uk.

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